

ICPC's Project Tracking Initiative and Public Financial Accountability

Dr. Usiere Ekere Nelson

Centre for Peace and Security Studies, University of Port Harcourt

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ABSTRACT

Public financial accountability remains a fundamental requirement for effective governance and sustainable development in Nigeria, particularly given persistent concerns about corruption, abandoned projects, weak budget implementation, and inefficient utilization of public resources. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) has introduced the Project Tracking Initiative as a preventive and monitoring mechanism aimed at strengthening transparency, detecting irregularities, and ensuring that government-funded projects correspond with approved budgets and intended public benefits. This article examines the relationship between the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative and public financial accountability in Nigeria. It adopts a qualitative methodology based on documentary analysis and normative evaluation of relevant legislation, official reports, policy documents, scholarly literature, and materials on public financial management and anti-corruption practices. The study argues that project tracking provides an important institutional mechanism for reducing information asymmetry between government institutions and citizens, verifying project implementation, identifying potential financial and contractual irregularities, and promoting responsible utilization of public resources. However, the effectiveness of the Initiative is constrained by inadequate institutional capacity, limited access to reliable financial information, weak inter-agency coordination, political and administrative challenges, poor follow-up mechanisms, and difficulties in translating monitoring findings into timely sanctions and corrective actions. The article therefore contends that project tracking should move beyond physical verification to an integrated accountability framework connecting budget allocation, procurement, financial disbursement, project execution, public disclosure, citizen participation, enforcement, and recovery of misappropriated resources. Strengthening these linkages would enhance the capacity of the ICPC to promote value for money, improve public trust, and ensure that public expenditure produces measurable developmental outcomes.

Keywords: ICPC; Project Tracking; Public Financial Accountability; Anti-Corruption; Transparency; Public Expenditure; Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Public expenditure constitutes one of the principal instruments through which governments pursue economic development, social welfare and the provision of essential infrastructure. In Nigeria, public resources are channelled through annual budgets into sectors such as education, health, roads, water supply, agriculture, electricity and other forms of public infrastructure. The effectiveness of such expenditure, however, depends not merely on the amount appropriated but on whether allocated resources are transparently managed, efficiently disbursed and translated into completed projects and accessible public services. Public financial management therefore has a direct relationship with the quality of governance and the capacity of the state to convert public resources into tangible developmental outcomes. The World Bank (2020) observes that effective public financial management is essential for governments to allocate resources strategically, control expenditure and deliver public services efficiently. In the Nigerian context, the question of how public funds are transformed from budgetary provisions into measurable development outcomes consequently remains central to debates on accountable governance.

One of the persistent challenges confronting public expenditure in Nigeria is the failure to achieve a satisfactory correspondence between approved projects and actual project delivery. Government-funded projects may remain unexecuted, partially executed, abandoned or completed below expected standards. Independent monitoring has continued to identify cases of abandoned and under-executed public projects. For instance, BudgIT's 2023/2024 tracking exercise reported 129 abandoned projects valued at approximately ₦16 billion, while also identifying weaknesses involving project execution and the management of public resources (BudgIT, 2024). Such situations represent more than infrastructure deficits; they raise fundamental questions concerning the integrity of public expenditure, procurement processes, contractual obligations and the accountability of public officials and contractors.

Nigeria continues to commit substantial public resources to capital projects intended to promote economic growth, improve infrastructure and enhance citizens' welfare. Yet, the existence of budgetary allocations does not necessarily translate into corresponding development outcomes. A significant gap may emerge between what is appropriated in the budget, released to implementing institutions, paid to contractors, physically executed and ultimately received as a public service. The persistence of abandoned, poorly executed, inflated and, in some cases, inadequately documented projects raises fundamental questions concerning the effectiveness of Nigeria's public financial accountability mechanisms. The problem is particularly troubling because public project failure can occur at several stages of the expenditure process. Projects may be poorly conceptualized or duplicated during budgeting; procurement processes may be manipulated; contracts may be inflated; funds may be released without corresponding implementation; contractors may execute projects below specification; and completed projects may fail to deliver sustainable public benefits.

The ICPC's own investigations reinforce the seriousness of the problem. Its Phase V tracking exercise identified issues including projects domiciled outside the core mandates of implementing agencies, abuse of selective tendering, weaknesses surrounding certificates of no objection, conflicts of interest and corruption risks associated with certain empowerment projects (ICPC, 2023). These findings suggest that weaknesses in public financial accountability are not confined to the physical abandonment of projects but extend into budgeting, procurement, institutional responsibility and contract administration. The establishment of CEPTI therefore represents an important attempt to address these weaknesses. However, an important analytical gap remains. The tracking of projects, although valuable, does not in itself guarantee accountability. It is necessary to determine whether monitoring findings produce concrete consequences such as project completion, recovery of public resources, correction of substandard work, sanctions against responsible actors and improved institutional practices. The ICPC has reported recoveries, government savings and completed projects resulting from its interventions, but the broader effectiveness and sustainability of these outcomes require critical examination. The central problem addressed by this study, therefore, is the persistent disconnection between public financial allocation and tangible public benefit despite the existence of institutional mechanisms for monitoring and anti-corruption intervention. The study is particularly concerned with whether the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative has succeeded in transforming project monitoring into effective public financial accountability. It consequently examines the Initiative's institutional foundations, contribution to transparency, capacity to detect and address irregularities, limitations, and prospects for strengthening accountable public expenditure in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the nature and institutional framework of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative?
2. How does project tracking contribute to public financial accountability in Nigeria?
3. To what extent has the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative enhanced transparency and accountability in government-funded projects?
4. What institutional, financial, administrative and operational challenges constrain the effectiveness of the Initiative?

5. How can ICPC project tracking be strengthened as an instrument of public financial accountability in Nigeria?

The general objective of this study is to critically examine the contribution of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative to public financial accountability in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine the conceptual and institutional foundations of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative;
2. analyze the relationship between project tracking and public financial accountability;
3. assess the contribution of the Initiative to transparency and accountability in government-funded projects;
4. identify the institutional and operational challenges affecting its effectiveness; and
5. propose measures for strengthening project tracking as an instrument of public financial accountability in Nigeria.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The Concept of Public Financial Accountability

Public financial accountability refers to the obligation of public institutions and officials to explain justify and take responsibility for the management and utilization of public resources. It involves transparency in financial decisions, answerability for expenditure and appropriate consequences where public resources are mismanaged. According to the World Bank (2020), effective public financial management promotes the efficient allocation and control of public resources while strengthening government effectiveness. Financial accountability therefore extends beyond keeping accurate financial records to ensuring that public funds are used for their approved purposes and produce the intended public value. In Nigeria, public financial accountability is particularly important because weaknesses in expenditure management can create opportunities for corruption, waste and diversion of public resources. It requires institutional mechanisms through which government spending can be scrutinized, officials can be required to explain their decisions, and corrective or punitive measures can follow established violations. Thus, transparency, answerability and enforcement constitute interconnected dimensions of effective public financial accountability.

Public Expenditure and Project Delivery

Public expenditure involves the process through which government resources are allocated and utilized to achieve public objectives. The process generally moves from budgetary allocation through procurement and contract award to project execution, payment, reporting and monitoring. Effective management at each stage is necessary for ensuring that approved projects are actually delivered. The challenge arises when financial expenditure becomes disconnected from physical project implementation. A project may receive budgetary approval and financial disbursement without being completed or without corresponding quality and value. Consequently, monitoring project implementation provides an important means of determining whether public expenditure has produced the infrastructure or services for which it was authorized.

Transparency and Accountability in Public Governance

Transparency involves making relevant governmental information accessible and understandable to citizens and oversight institutions. Accountability goes further by requiring public officials and institutions to explain their decisions and accept responsibility for their actions. The two concepts are therefore closely connected: transparency provides information, while accountability provides mechanisms for questioning and responding to that information. Public accountability may operate horizontally through institutions such as legislatures, auditors and anti-corruption agencies, and vertically through citizens, civil society organizations and the media. Citizen participation is particularly relevant to project monitoring because communities are often in the

best position to verify whether projects reported as funded or completed actually exist and serve their intended purposes.

Anti-Corruption Institutions and Financial Accountability

Anti-corruption institutions play an important role in protecting public resources through both preventive and punitive strategies. While prosecution and sanctions address corruption after it occurs, preventive mechanisms seek to identify weaknesses and irregularities before they result in significant public loss. The ICPC's mandate reflects both dimensions, with project tracking providing an important preventive mechanism for identifying irregularities in publicly funded projects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) Project Tracking Initiative requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining both the underlying governance problem and the institutional mechanisms through which monitoring can address it. Publicly funded projects involve multiple actors with different interests, levels of information and responsibilities. Citizens provide or are ultimately the beneficiaries of public resources; elected and appointed officials make decisions concerning their allocation and use; ministries, departments and agencies administer projects; while contractors undertake physical implementation. This complex relationship creates opportunities for information asymmetry, opportunistic behaviour, weak monitoring and inadequate accountability. Against this background, this article adopts Principal-Agent Theory and Public Accountability Theory as complementary analytical perspectives. Principal-Agent Theory explains why accountability problems arise in the first place, particularly where those entrusted with public resources possess greater information than the citizens on whose behalf they act. Public Accountability Theory, on the other hand, provides a broader framework for understanding how transparency, answerability, responsiveness, oversight and enforcement can constrain the misuse of delegated authority. Together, the two theories provide an appropriate basis for analyzing the extent to which the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative can strengthen public financial accountability in Nigeria.

Principal-Agent Theory

Principal-Agent Theory provides an important conceptual explanation of the relationship between citizens and public officials in a democratic system. The theory emerged from economic and organizational analyses of situations in which one party, the principal, delegates responsibility to another party, the agent, to perform a task on the principal's behalf. The central problem arises because the principal and agent may not possess identical interests, and the agent may have access to information that is unavailable to the principal. This creates opportunities for opportunistic behaviour, shirking and the pursuit of private interests at the expense of the principal's objectives (Laffont & Martimort, 2002).

Although developed primarily within economics and organizational theory, the principal-agent perspective has become highly relevant to the study of public administration and corruption. In democratic governance, citizens can be understood as principals who delegate authority to elected representatives and public officials. Government officials become agents entrusted with managing public resources and implementing policies on behalf of citizens. The problem is that citizens cannot continuously observe every decision made by government officials. Consequently, officials may possess considerable discretion over public resources without facing immediate scrutiny from the citizens who ultimately own those resources. The theory therefore helps explain why corruption and other forms of public-sector misconduct can occur. Where monitoring is weak and the probability of detection is low, an agent may have incentives to deviate from the principal's interests. In the context of public projects, such deviation could involve procurement manipulation, non-performance, inflated costs, poor-quality execution or other forms of misuse of public resources. The OECD (2020) identifies public procurement as an area particularly exposed to corruption risks because of the substantial financial resources involved and the complex interaction between public officials and private contractors.

The ICPC Project Tracking Initiative fits directly into this theoretical framework. By physically verifying publicly funded projects and comparing actual implementation with approved plans, budgets and contractual specifications, the initiative creates an additional mechanism through which agents can be monitored. The purpose is not simply to observe projects but to reduce the informational advantage enjoyed by implementing officials and contractors. The principal-agent perspective therefore provides a useful explanation of why project tracking is necessary. If citizens could perfectly observe government expenditure and project implementation, extensive monitoring mechanisms would be less necessary. In reality, citizens face substantial informational and institutional limitations. Project tracking attempts to compensate for these limitations by generating information that can be used by government oversight institutions, civil society and communities.

Public Accountability Theory

While Principal-Agent Theory explains the underlying relationship between citizens and public officials, Public Accountability Theory provides a broader framework for understanding the processes through which public authorities are expected to justify and take responsibility for their actions. Accountability is multidimensional. It cannot be reduced simply to the existence of financial records or the possibility of punishment. Bovens (2019) conceptualizes accountability as a relationship in which an actor is obliged to explain and justify conduct to a forum that can question the actor and potentially pass judgement. This conception highlights the importance of information, explanation, judgement and consequences.

From this perspective, accountability contains several interconnected dimensions, including transparency, answerability, responsiveness and enforcement. Transparency makes relevant information available. Answerability requires officials to explain and justify decisions. Responsiveness concerns the capacity and willingness of institutions to respond to identified problems. Enforcement provides consequences where established obligations have been violated. Transparency is therefore a foundational element of accountability. Citizens cannot ask a meaningful question about public expenditure without access to information concerning what was approved, how much was spent, who was responsible and what was delivered. The World Bank (2022) similarly emphasizes the importance of transparency and institutional accountability for improving public-sector performance and strengthening trust in government.

The concept of responsiveness introduces another dimension. Accountability becomes meaningful when institutions respond to legitimate concerns and take corrective action. A community that reports an abandoned project should not simply have its complaint recorded; the relevant institution should investigate and, where appropriate, take corrective measures. Public Accountability Theory is therefore particularly useful for this article because it allows project tracking to be evaluated beyond the question of whether it detects irregularities. It permits consideration of whether detected problems lead to explanations, institutional responses, corrective measures, sanctions and ultimately improved public outcomes.

Application of the Theories to ICPC Project Tracking

The combined application of Principal-Agent Theory and Public Accountability Theory provides a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative. Principal-Agent Theory explains the problem: citizens delegate authority and resources to officials and contractors who possess superior information and may have incentives that diverge from public interests. Public Accountability Theory explains the institutional response: transparency, monitoring, answerability, responsiveness, citizen oversight and enforcement can be used to constrain misuse of delegated authority.

First, project tracking can reduce information asymmetry. The principal-agent problem is intensified when citizens have little information concerning public projects. By collecting and disseminating information concerning project location, cost, contractor, implementation status and physical condition, tracking narrows the informational gap between public institutions and citizens. The ICPC's project-tracking exercises are therefore consistent with the theoretical expectation that monitoring can reduce the discretion created by information asymmetry. Second, tracking increases monitoring, principal-Agent Theory predicts that agents are more likely to pursue the principal's interests when effective monitoring and sanctions exist. Physical

inspection creates the possibility that discrepancies between official reports and actual implementation will be discovered. This may influence the behaviour of public officials and contractors even where no irregularity is ultimately found. Third, project tracking improves the visibility of government expenditure. Public financial information can otherwise remain abstract to citizens. Project tracking gives expenditure a physical reference point. A budgetary allocation becomes connected to a particular road, school, health facility, water scheme or other project. This enables citizens to evaluate whether public resources have generated corresponding physical outcomes. Fourth, tracking creates opportunities for answerability. Once discrepancies are identified, implementing agencies and responsible officials can be required to explain them. This represents a movement from simple transparency to substantive accountability. A project recorded as completed but found physically incomplete provides a concrete basis for requesting clarification. The relevant agency may then be required to demonstrate whether the discrepancy resulted from delayed funding, contract variation, administrative challenges or other circumstances. The theoretical relationship can therefore be represented as follows: Delegation of public resources → Information asymmetry → Opportunity for opportunism → Project monitoring → Detection of discrepancies → Answerability → Corrective action/enforcement → Improved accountability.

The combined theoretical perspective therefore provides a basis for the article's central critical proposition: the success of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative should be measured not simply by the number of projects inspected or irregularities discovered, but by the extent to which monitoring reduces information asymmetry, compels answerability, facilitates corrective action, strengthens institutional control and ultimately improves the relationship between public expenditure and tangible benefits to citizens.

THE ICPC PROJECT TRACKING INITIATIVE

The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) was established under the Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act 2000 as a specialized institution for preventing and combating corrupt practices in Nigeria. Its mandate encompasses investigation and prosecution of corruption-related offences, prevention of corrupt practices, examination of institutional systems and procedures susceptible to corruption, and public enlightenment. The Commission therefore operates through both enforcement and preventive approaches to corruption control. The preventive dimension is particularly relevant to public expenditure because it seeks to identify institutional weaknesses and practices that create opportunities for the misuse of public resources (ICPC, 2023).

Within Nigeria's broader anti-corruption framework, the ICPC works alongside institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Auditor-General, the Bureau of Public Procurement and other public accountability institutions. However, the ICPC has increasingly emphasized preventive interventions designed to address corruption risks before they result in extensive losses. Its project-tracking program reflects this orientation by taking anti-corruption monitoring directly to project sites and communities. Rather than relying exclusively on financial records or post-investigation procedures, the Commission seeks to establish whether public resources have resulted in the physical projects for which they were appropriated (ICPC, 2024).

The Constituency and Executive Projects Tracking Initiative (CEPTI) was introduced in 2019 against the background of persistent concerns about abandoned, uncompleted, poorly executed and inadequately monitored government projects. The initiative initially focused on constituency projects but was subsequently expanded to executive projects because of their significant financial implications within the federal budget. According to ICPC, the initiative is designed to monitor projects from inception to completion and to identify practices that may undermine the effective utilization of public resources (ICPC, 2023). The rationale for CEPTI is rooted in the need to establish a direct connection between public expenditure and tangible development outcomes. A budgetary allocation does not automatically constitute development; its value depends on whether the resources are properly utilized and whether the intended project is actually delivered. Consequently, physical verification provides an important means of determining whether government expenditure corresponds with actual implementation.

The project-tracking process involves several interconnected activities. First, projects are identified and selected for tracking from relevant government programs and budgetary provisions. The selected projects are subsequently subjected to field verification, where officials and technical personnel assess their physical existence, location, level of completion and conformity with approved specifications. The verification process may involve examination of the quality and quantity of work undertaken, consultation with implementing agencies and contractors, and interaction with members of the beneficiary communities. Where discrepancies are discovered, the findings are documented and referred to the appropriate authorities for corrective or enforcement action. Depending on the nature of the irregularity, interventions may include directing contractors to return to project sites, ensuring completion of abandoned projects, investigating suspected fraudulent practices or pursuing recovery of public resources where appropriate (ICPC, 2023). The initiative has also increasingly incorporated digital approaches to project monitoring. Digital project-tracking systems can facilitate the collection, storage and analysis of project information and improve the capacity of institutions to monitor projects systematically. Such technological development is particularly important for strengthening transparency and reducing the difficulties associated with tracking large numbers of geographically dispersed government projects.

PROJECT TRACKING AND PUBLIC FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Public financial accountability is concerned not merely with the authorization and expenditure of public resources but also with the extent to which such resources produce the outcomes for which they were appropriated. In a democratic system, public expenditure derives its legitimacy from its capacity to respond to collectively identified needs and improve citizens' welfare. Consequently, accountability must extend beyond financial reporting to include the verification of whether budgetary commitments have translated into actual goods, infrastructure and services. This is particularly important in Nigeria, where substantial public resources are allocated annually to capital projects, yet concerns persist regarding abandoned projects, delayed implementation, poor-quality infrastructure, inflated contracts and discrepancies between budgetary provisions and actual delivery. Project tracking has consequently emerged as an important instrument for connecting public expenditure with physical outcomes and strengthening accountability in the management of government resources.

The relevance of project tracking to public financial accountability can be understood within the broader movement towards results-oriented public financial management. Contemporary public-sector accountability increasingly requires governments to demonstrate not only how much money has been spent but also what has been achieved with that expenditure. The International Monetary Fund (2022), for instance, emphasizes the importance of fiscal transparency and reliable information concerning the use and outcomes of public resources. Similarly, it is worthy to note here that the World Bank (2022) stresses that effective public expenditure management requires institutional mechanisms capable of linking resources to service delivery and development outcomes. Project tracking complements these financial-management mechanisms by introducing a physical and empirical dimension to expenditure accountability. Nigeria's experience provides a particularly relevant illustration. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) commenced its Constituency and Executive Projects Tracking Initiative in 2019 with the objective of improving transparency, social accountability and value for money in publicly funded projects. The initiative involves the examination of budgetary allocations, procurement processes, project implementation and physical conditions at project sites. Its development across successive phases demonstrates an institutional recognition that public expenditure cannot be adequately assessed solely through financial records. By 2022, the ICPC had expanded the exercise to hundreds of projects across different states, with the explicit objective of investigating fraudulent procurement practices, identifying poorly executed or unexecuted projects and ensuring value for money (ICPC, 2022).

Linking Budgetary Allocation to Physical Outcomes

The first contribution of project tracking to public financial accountability is its ability to establish a relationship between budgetary allocation and physical outcomes. A budget is fundamentally a statement of governmental intentions regarding the mobilization and allocation of public resources. However, an

appropriation does not itself constitute development. The transformation of an appropriation into a road, school, hospital, water facility, agricultural project or other public asset requires effective procurement, release and utilization of funds, contract administration and physical implementation. The accountability problem emerges when there is a disconnection between these stages. A project may appear in an approved budget, receive financial allocation and even be reported as implemented without citizens receiving the infrastructure or service contemplated by the expenditure. Project tracking addresses this gap by asking what happened after the budgetary allocation was made. It therefore changes the focus from "How much was appropriated?" to "What was produced with the appropriation?"

This distinction is particularly important in the Nigerian context. The ICPC's tracking activities have involved comparing official project information with conditions observed at project sites. Its Phase I exercise, for example, was designed to examine projects funded through government appropriations and assess their implementation. Subsequent exercises continued this approach, involving professional bodies, government institutions, civil society organizations and the media (ICPC, 2020). Project tracking can therefore establish a chain of accountability beginning with budgetary allocation and extending through fund release, procurement, contract award, implementation and completion. Where the physical outcome corresponds substantially with the approved project, tracking provides evidence of implementation. Where significant discrepancies exist, it raises questions requiring further administrative, financial or investigative examination.

The importance of this approach is reinforced by the recognition that expenditure accountability should incorporate performance information. The OECD (2023) argues that contemporary public budgeting increasingly requires governments to connect expenditure with measurable performance and results. In this respect, project tracking represents a practical mechanism through which budgetary intentions can be compared with actual outputs. The process is particularly useful for capital projects because their physical characteristics can often be independently verified. A road has a measurable length and physical condition; a school has identifiable structures and facilities; a health centre has a physical location and expected equipment; and a water project has identifiable infrastructure and intended beneficiaries. Such characteristics create opportunities for independent verification that complement traditional financial auditing.

Detecting Financial and Contractual Irregularities

Project tracking is also significant because it can expose financial and contractual irregularities that may remain concealed when accountability is based exclusively on documentary records. The existence of a contract, payment voucher or completion certificate does not necessarily establish that the contracted work has been satisfactorily delivered. Physical verification provides another layer of evidence through which the accuracy of official claims can be tested. One important irregularity that project tracking can help expose is the phenomenon of ghost projects. These are projects that appear in official budgetary or implementation records but have little or no corresponding physical existence. The identification of such discrepancies is important because it raises fundamental questions concerning the integrity of the budgeting, procurement and payment processes. Project tracking can identify the location of a supposedly completed project and establish whether the project exists in reality.

Another concern is inflated contracting. A project may be assigned a financial value that appears disproportionate to its scope or physical output. Project tracking, especially when undertaken with professionals such as quantity surveyors and engineers, can provide evidence concerning the quantity and quality of work actually delivered. The ICPC's tracking methodology has explicitly involved professional assessment of project quantities and quality. In its Phase IV exercise, for example, project teams visited sites to establish existence and level of execution, while quantity surveyors assisted in evaluating quantities and quality (ICPC, 2022). Project tracking is equally relevant to non-execution and partial execution. A project may receive appropriation and contractual approval but never commence. In another case, implementation may begin but stop before completion. These circumstances create an important accountability question because public resources may already have been committed. Monitoring can establish the degree of physical completion and compare it with the expenditure reported.

Evidence from the ICPC's project-tracking exercises demonstrates the practical relevance of this function. The Commission reported that its earlier tracking activities resulted in contractors returning to abandoned project sites and those recoveries were made in relation to certain projects and items. The Commission has consequently presented project tracking as both a preventive and enforcement-oriented accountability mechanism (ICPC, 2021).

Enhancing Transparency in Public Expenditure

Transparency constitutes a fundamental condition for effective public accountability because citizens cannot meaningfully scrutinize expenditure about which they possess little or no information. Project tracking enhances transparency by making government projects more visible and by enabling citizens and oversight institutions to compare official information with observable realities. In conventional public financial management, information is often contained in budgets, procurement documents, financial statements and audit reports. Although these instruments are essential, they may be difficult for ordinary citizens to interpret. Project tracking makes accountability more concrete by translating financial information into questions that citizens can understand: What project was approved? Where is it located? How much was allocated? Who is responsible for implementation? What was the expected completion date? What is its current state? Is it serving its intended beneficiaries?

This process can reduce the information asymmetry that exists between government institutions and citizens. Public agencies possess extensive information about contracts, payments and implementation, while communities frequently possess limited information about projects intended for their benefit. The availability of project information and independent verification can narrow this gap. The ICPC recognised this dimension of project tracking from the beginning of its initiative. Its early project-tracking report noted the intention to publicize information concerning constituency projects so that citizens could know which projects were intended for their communities and consequently ask questions and monitor implementation (ICPC, 2019).

The importance of transparency is further demonstrated by the collaborative character of the ICPC initiative. The Commission has worked with government agencies, professional organizations, civil society groups and the media. Such collaboration recognizes that public financial accountability cannot be effectively achieved by a single institution. It requires multiple sources of information and multiple forms of oversight (ICPC, 2024). Transparency can also have a preventive effect. When public officials, implementing agencies and contractors are aware that project implementation can be publicly scrutinized, the likelihood of detection of irregularities increases. Public visibility may therefore encourage greater compliance with procurement rules and contractual requirements.

Promoting Value for Money

The concept of value for money provides perhaps the strongest justification for project tracking. Public resources are scarce, and every expenditure carries an opportunity cost. Money spent inefficiently on an abandoned or poorly executed project represents resources that could have been used for other public purposes. Consequently, financial accountability must ask whether government expenditure has generated reasonable economic and social value. Value for money can be examined through the interconnected principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Efficiency concerns the relationship between inputs and outputs, while effectiveness concerns whether the outputs actually achieve the intended objectives. Project tracking contributes to economy by enabling examination of whether the resources committed to a project correspond reasonably with its scope and specifications. It contributes to efficiency by comparing the amount of resources utilized with the physical progress achieved. It contributes to effectiveness by examining whether completed projects actually provide the services or benefits for which they were established.

The distinction between completion and effectiveness is particularly important. A health centre can be physically completed without providing meaningful healthcare if it lacks essential equipment or personnel. A school can be constructed without significantly improving educational access if it is located where it is not needed or remains unusable. A water project can be completed but fail to provide reliable potable water. Thus,

physical completion is an important but insufficient measure of value for money. The ICPC has explicitly incorporated value-for-money considerations into its project-tracking framework. Its Phase VI exercise, for instance, identified full execution, compliance with specifications and value for government expenditure among its central objectives (ICPC, 2023).

The importance of this approach has become even more evident in recent infrastructure monitoring. In November 2025, the ICPC and Federal Ministry of Works commenced a nationwide special tracking exercise involving 760 federal road projects with a combined contract value exceeding ₦36 trillion. The exercise involves physical verification and performance assessment by investigators, engineers and quantity-surveying professionals across the states and the Federal Capital Territory (ICPC, 2025). This development illustrates an important evolution in public financial accountability: attention is moving from merely recording expenditure to assessing whether very large public investments correspond with actual infrastructure performance. The significance of project tracking therefore lies in its capacity to introduce a results dimension into public financial accountability. The relevant question is no longer simply whether funds were legally appropriated or whether payments were made through administrative procedures. The more fundamental question is whether citizens obtained an appropriate quantity and quality of public goods and services from the resources expended.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE ICPC PROJECT TRACKING INITIATIVE

The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) Project Tracking Initiative represents an important innovation in Nigeria's evolving anti-corruption and public accountability architecture. Introduced in 2019 as the Constituency Projects Tracking Initiative and subsequently expanded to cover executive projects, the initiative was conceived against the background of persistent concerns regarding the implementation of publicly funded projects. Its underlying logic is straightforward: where public projects can be identified, physically verified and compared with approved budgets and contractual obligations, discrepancies between public expenditure and actual outcomes become more visible and potentially more difficult to conceal. The initiative has consequently expanded the scope of anti-corruption intervention from the investigation of corruption after it occurs towards preventive monitoring of government expenditure during implementation (ICPC, 2024). The significance of the initiative, however, should not be exaggerated. The existence of a project-tracking mechanism does not automatically translate into accountability, nor does the identification of an irregularity necessarily establish corruption or result in recovery or sanction. There is a considerable institutional distance between identifying a problem, establishing responsibility, securing enforcement, recovering public resources and ensuring that citizens ultimately receive the intended public benefit. This distinction is central to a critical assessment of the initiative.

The available evidence nevertheless suggests that project tracking has created greater visibility around government-funded projects and has generated information that would otherwise remain difficult for citizens and oversight institutions to obtain. The ICPC has reported thousands of projects tracked across different phases of the initiative, including projects that were unexecuted, abandoned, poorly executed or inconsistent with approved specifications. In 2026, the Commission reported that between 2023 and June 2026 it had tracked 4,582 projects with a combined value exceeding ₦22.53 trillion, while reporting government savings of ₦385.62 billion and the return of projects valued at approximately ₦507.04 billion to project sites (ICPC, 2026). These figures are institutionally significant, although they should be treated as reported administrative outcomes rather than independently established measures of the initiative's overall impact. The appropriate analytical question, therefore, is not simply whether the initiative has produced findings, but whether those findings have generated sustained improvements in public financial accountability, project completion, expenditure integrity and citizen welfare.

One of the most important contributions of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative has been the increased visibility of government projects. Before the introduction of systematic tracking, information concerning constituency and executive projects was frequently contained within complex budgetary, procurement and administrative documents that were not readily accessible or intelligible to ordinary citizens. Project tracking has helped bring such projects into the public domain by identifying their locations, implementing agencies,

contractors, costs and physical status. This has made public expenditure more concrete and has provided citizens with information through which official claims can be compared with conditions on the ground. The importance of this contribution lies in the relationship between information and accountability. Citizens cannot effectively demand explanations for a project about which they have no knowledge. By making projects visible, tracking provides the informational foundation for public scrutiny. The ICPC's early project-tracking framework explicitly recognised this objective, emphasizing the need to provide information that would enable citizens and communities to know the projects intended for their areas and participate in monitoring them (ICPC, 2019).

Despite its contributions, the effectiveness of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative is constrained by institutional challenges. The first concerns institutional capacity. Project tracking requires investigators, engineers, quantity surveyors, auditors, legal practitioners, data analysts and other specialists capable of assessing complex projects across different sectors and geographical locations. Roads, hospitals, schools, water schemes and agricultural projects involve different technical standards and contractual arrangements. Effective tracking therefore requires multidisciplinary capacity rather than investigation alone. The scale of Nigeria's public expenditure and geographical size creates an additional challenge. Thousands of federal and sub-national projects may be distributed across the country at any particular time. It is difficult for a single anti-corruption institution to monitor all projects continuously. The expansion of the ICPC initiative demonstrates institutional ambition, but expansion itself creates a capacity problem: the more projects that are selected for tracking, the greater the financial, logistical and human resources required for meaningful verification.

Resource constraints therefore constitute a related challenge. Physical verification requires transportation, field personnel, technical equipment, documentation, data management and follow-up investigations. Monitoring that is inadequately funded may become episodic rather than continuous. A project may be visited once, documented and reported, but subsequent changes may remain unobserved.

A further challenge is weak inter-agency coordination. Public projects involve numerous institutions, including ministries, departments and agencies, procurement authorities, budget offices, contractors, supervising consultants and sometimes state or local government institutions. The information required to track a project may consequently be dispersed across several institutions. If these institutions do not maintain compatible records or respond promptly to requests for information, monitoring becomes difficult. A particularly significant challenge concerns the availability and reliability of project and financial information. Effective tracking begins with accurate information about what government has approved and what it intends to implement. Yet discrepancies can occur between budget documents, procurement records, contract documents, payment records and implementation reports.

Poor record keeping compounds the problem. Effective accountability requires a reliable documentary trail from budgetary allocation through procurement, contract award, payment, implementation and completion. Weak documentation creates opportunities for irregularities while simultaneously making investigation more difficult. It can become difficult to determine who authorized a decision, what was actually contracted, how much was paid and what level of implementation was certified. The problem also reflects a broader disconnect between budgetary and implementation information. A budget may identify an allocation without providing sufficient information concerning implementation milestones and measurable outputs. Conversely, an implementing agency may possess detailed project information that is not easily connected to the original budgetary provision. This separation weakens the ability of oversight institutions to follow the complete expenditure chain.

Financial accountability also becomes more complicated where there are contract variations, inflation and changing economic conditions. A difference between an original contract price and final expenditure is not necessarily evidence of corruption. Nigeria's experience with high inflation, foreign-exchange pressures and rising construction costs creates legitimate circumstances in which project costs may change. The challenge is therefore not simply to detect differences but to determine whether variations are legally authorized, properly documented and economically justified.

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A STRONGER PUBLIC FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY OPERATION

The preceding analysis demonstrates that the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative has introduced an important dimension into Nigeria's public accountability system by bringing the physical implementation of government projects into the field of anti-corruption monitoring. Its significance lies in the capacity to expose discrepancies between what government approves, what implementing agencies and contractors report, and what citizens actually encounter at project sites. However, project tracking, by itself, cannot constitute a complete public financial accountability framework. Monitoring can identify a problem, but accountability requires that the problem be investigated, explained, corrected and, where appropriate, sanctioned. The central challenge, therefore, is to transform project tracking from an essentially monitoring-oriented intervention into an integrated system of financial verification, physical verification, institutional response, enforcement and citizen oversight. This broader approach is consistent with contemporary thinking on public financial management, which increasingly emphasizes the relationship between public resources, institutional performance and measurable development outcomes.

From Project Monitoring to Full Financial Accountability

Project monitoring should not end with determining whether a project exists, is ongoing, has been completed or has been abandoned. Such information represents an important starting point, but it does not by itself establish financial accountability. The more substantive questions are what happened to the resources allocated to the project, who was responsible for implementation, whether expenditure corresponded with contractual obligations, whether identified discrepancies were explained and what corrective or enforcement measures followed. The distinction between monitoring and accountability is therefore fundamental. Monitoring generates information about the condition or performance of a project. Accountability requires institutions and officials to respond to that information. Bovens (2019) conceptualizes accountability as involving an obligation to explain and justify conduct before a forum capable of questioning and judging the actor. From the above claims it can be said logically that applying this conception to project tracking means that the discovery of an abandoned or poorly executed project should initiate an accountability process rather than constitute its conclusion in the society.

For example, if a government-funded school is found to be only partially completed despite substantial expenditure, the tracking exercise should establish the approved cost, amount paid, contractor responsible, implementation period, contractual specifications and reasons for non-completion. The responsible implementing agency should then be required to explain the discrepancy. Depending on the evidence, the process may result in project completion, recovery of improperly expended resources, contractual penalties, administrative action or prosecution. This requires a shift from project-status reporting to accountability-cycle management. The accountability cycle should encompass identification, verification, explanation, investigation, corrective action, enforcement and follow-up. Such a model would ensure that project tracking becomes a component of the wider public financial management system rather than an isolated anti-corruption exercise.

Integrating Financial and Physical Project Monitoring

A stronger accountability framework requires the integration of budget data, procurement information, contract information, payment records and physical project status. At present, these categories of information may be distributed across different institutions and administrative systems. Such fragmentation makes it difficult to reconstruct the complete financial and implementation history of a project. The budget provides the starting point by indicating the government's approved financial commitment. Procurement records should then show how the contractor was selected and the term under which implementation was authorized. Contract information establishes the agreed scope, cost, specifications and completion period. Payment records reveal the amount of public resources actually released or paid. Physical monitoring, finally, establishes what has actually been delivered. Connecting these elements would provide a more comprehensive picture of public

expenditure. The resulting accountability chain can be represented as: Budget allocation → Procurement → Contract award → Fund release/payment → Physical implementation → Verification → Outcome.

Strengthening Digital Project Tracking

Digital technology provides significant opportunities for strengthening project monitoring and public financial accountability. Nigeria's large geographical area and the enormous number of government-funded projects make purely manual monitoring difficult and expensive. Digital systems can improve the collection, storage, verification and dissemination of project information. A comprehensive digital project database should ideally contain information on each publicly funded project, including its location, implementing agency, contractor, approved amount, contract value, commencement date, expected completion date, funding source, project scope, implementation status and relevant documentation. Such a database would allow government institutions and citizens to follow a project's history from appropriation through completion.

Geospatial technology can further improve project verification. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can associate projects with precise locations, making it possible to determine whether a project exists at the location specified in official records. This is particularly useful in detecting discrepancies involving project location, duplication or non-execution. Geospatial information can also support planning by identifying areas where public infrastructure is concentrated or where significant service gaps remain. Digital photographs and verification records can provide additional evidence. Time-stamped photographs, videos and other digital records can document the condition of projects during successive monitoring visits. When appropriately authenticated and securely stored, such evidence can facilitate comparison between different stages of implementation. The objective should not simply be to accumulate photographs but to develop a reliable evidence trail that can support administrative and investigative processes.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative demonstrates that the program represents an important development in Nigeria's evolving anti-corruption architecture. Traditionally, anti-corruption interventions have often been associated with investigation, prosecution and punishment after suspected misconduct has occurred. The project tracking approach introduces a stronger preventive and evidence-based dimension by seeking to establish, during or after implementation, whether public resources are producing the projects and services for which they were appropriated. In this respect, project tracking moves anti-corruption practice closer to the point at which public expenditure is transformed into physical outcomes. By physically verifying projects, engaging implementing institutions and communities, identifying implementation gaps and drawing attention to irregularities, the initiative provides an institutional mechanism through which public expenditure can be subjected to greater scrutiny (ICPC, 2024).

The significance of this shift should not, however, be exaggerated. Project tracking is an accountability-enabling mechanism rather than a complete accountability system. The identification of an uncompleted project, a discrepancy in project specifications, poor-quality execution or a suspected financial irregularity does not, by itself, establish that public financial accountability has been achieved. Monitoring produces information; accountability requires that the information is disclosed, explained, evaluated and, where necessary, followed by corrective or punitive consequences. This distinction is particularly important in the Nigerian context, where the existence of institutional oversight mechanisms does not always guarantee timely enforcement or recovery of public resources. The effectiveness of the Project Tracking Initiative must therefore be assessed beyond the number of projects visited or irregularities documented.

The article consequently argues for an integrated understanding of public financial accountability in which physical project monitoring is connected directly with the financial and administrative processes that produced the project. The appropriate accountability chain can be represented as: Budget Allocation → Procurement → Project Execution → Physical Verification → Financial Verification → Public Disclosure → Answerability → Enforcement → Recovery/Correction → Completion.

Each stage of this chain is important. Budget allocation establishes the public purpose for which resources are approved; procurement determines how contracts are awarded; execution translates contractual obligations into physical outputs; physical verification establishes what exists on the ground; and financial verification determines whether expenditure corresponds with approved allocations, contractual obligations and actual performance. Public disclosure then makes the information available to citizens and oversight institutions, while answerability requires responsible officials and contractors to explain discrepancies. Enforcement provides consequences where violations are established, while recovery and corrective action seek to restore public value. Completion and functionality provide the strongest evidence that public expenditure has produced the intended social outcome.

The theoretical discussion further reinforces this conclusion. From the perspective of Principal-Agent Theory, public expenditure involves multiple layers of delegation in which citizens ultimately entrust public officials and institutions with resources intended for collective purposes. Further delegation occurs when government agencies engage contractors to implement public projects. Each additional layer creates possibilities for information asymmetry, opportunism and weak oversight. Project tracking can reduce these information asymmetries by generating independent information about what is actually occurring at project sites. Nevertheless, reducing information asymmetry does not automatically eliminate opportunistic behaviour. The information generated through monitoring must be connected to institutional responses capable of changing behaviour and correcting identified failures.

The article therefore proposes that the future effectiveness of the Project Tracking Initiative should be measured through a broader set of accountability outcomes. The number of projects tracked remains useful as an indicator of institutional activity, but it is not sufficient as a measure of impact. More meaningful indicators would include the proportion of identified irregularities that receive documented responses; the number of projects corrected or completed following intervention; the amount of public resources recovered or protected; the extent to which responsible institutions provide explanations; the application of contractual, administrative or legal sanctions where appropriate; improvements in project quality and functionality; and, ultimately, the extent to which citizens receive the public goods and services for which government expenditure was intended. Such indicators would shift evaluation from activity measurement to accountability measurement.

Conclusively, the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative should be understood as part of a wider public financial accountability ecosystem rather than as a stand-alone anti-corruption solution. Its greatest contribution is its capacity to connect abstract figures in budgets and financial records with observable realities in communities. A budget allocation becomes more meaningful when citizens can establish what was supposed to be built, how much was approved, who received the contract, what has actually been constructed and whether the resulting facility serves its intended purpose. In this sense, project tracking can narrow the gap between public expenditure on paper and public benefit in practice. The central conclusion of this article is therefore that identifying irregularities is necessary but not sufficient for achieving public financial accountability. The real test of the ICPC Project Tracking Initiative is whether information generated through monitoring leads to transparency, answerability, corrective action, enforcement, recovery of public resources, completion of projects and tangible improvements in citizens' welfare. The initiative should consequently be strengthened through closer institutional collaboration, integrated financial and physical monitoring, digital information systems, community participation, effective enforcement and systematic follow-up.

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